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NASA is shutting down its Nano-Satellite Launch Challenge (updated)

A NASA prize competition to support the development of very small launch vehicles appears to be aborted by the space agency before it can get off the launch pad. In an email Tuesday afternoon, Space Florida vice president Percy Luney announced that NASA had notified the agency of its plans to terminate the Space Act Agreement between the two organizations regarding management of the [Nano-Satellite Launch Challenge](#). Under that agreement, Space Florida was responsible for running the prize competition, with NASA providing oversight as well as the prize purse as part of the space agency's Centennial Challenges prize program. "Space Florida is extremely disappointed at NASA's decision and has made a significant investment of staff and resources in implementing this Challenge," Luney wrote.

Luney's email did not indicate a specific reason for the termination of the agreement between the organizations. "The existence of the SWORDS and ALASA projects may have contributed to this NASA decision to end the Challenge," he wrote. That's a reference to two government-funded efforts to develop dedicated nanosatellite launchers, the [Soldier-Warfighter Operationally Responsive Deployer for Space \(SWORDS\)](#) vehicle under development by the US Army's Space and Missile Defense Command, and the [Airborne Launch Assist Space Access \(ALASA\)](#) program at DARPA.

NASA confirmed in response to an inquiry that it was canceling the competition for the reasons suspected by Luney, namely, the development of SWORDS and ALASA. Spokesman David Steitz said the NASA Engineering and Safety Center (NESC) performed a study of ongoing nanosat launcher efforts. "The study identified more than 15 efforts under way and concluded that other than the teams selected for ALASA and SWORDS, the companies lacked experience in designing, developing, or operating launch vehicles and none of the companies seemed to be sufficiently capable of self-financing to deliver the target capability (at approximately \$1 million per launch) in the next 3-5 years," he said.

[NASA originally announced the Nano-Satellite Launch Challenge in July 2010](#) and, in November of last year, [selected Space Florida as the organization to manage the program for NASA](#). The goal of the competition was to foster the development of very small launch vehicles that could launch nanosatellites, including individual cubesats, thus providing more flexibility than existing secondary launch opportunities.

To win the \$2-million prize, a competitor had to launch a satellite at least as large as a cubesat (10 centimeters on a side, with a mass of 1 kilogram) that completed a minimum of one orbit, and then do it again within one week. The competition appeared to get bogged

down in the development of detailed rules, though, with a draft initially released in April but a final version, based on comments from that draft, never approved. “The Competition has remained in a holding pattern. NASA has the revised Draft Rules for the Challenge,” Luney wrote in [the last weekly update about the competition](#), posted on Space Florida’s website on September 26.

In August, [NASA released a Request For Information \(RFI\) about the competition](#), “seeking additional information on the nano-satellite market and on approaches to address the market needs,” according to the agency. That RFI indicated that NASA was considering alternative approaches to the competition, including prizes based on the number of qualifying small satellites launched by a vehicle in a one-year period, or a focus instead on component development rather than full launch systems. “Response to the request for information indicated a community that was not prepared to develop a complete launch system in response to the NSL challenge,” Steitz said Tuesday.

“NASA’s decision to cancel the NanoSat Launch Challenge had nothing to do with Space Florida’s performance as an Allied Organization,” Steitz added. “Space Florida has been an excellent partner during the formulation and study of the challenge. We hope to work with Space Florida in the future on other partnering opportunities.”

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